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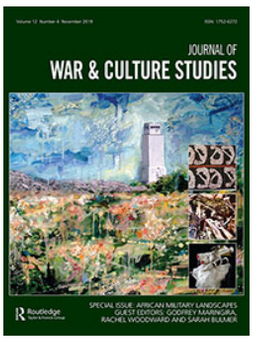

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When Soldiers' Survival Became Spiritual: Ugandan Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan war

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This paper examines military landscapes as a source of violence, and soldiers' efforts to deal with this violence by using their spiritual beliefs. The paper reveals how Ugandan soldiers who fought in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan believed that their survival in war was a consequence of their spiritual beliefs in God rather than the mighty power of the gun and their military knowledge. The paper is based on life histories of former Ugandan soldiers drawing on interviews with nine former soldiers. The soldiers encountered the strange terrains and landscapes of armed conflict, whilst enduring scarcity of the basic necessities in war. The soldiers described how the mighty and supernatural powers of the transcendent, as well as the promise of tradition and spiritual belief, were seen as important in understanding their survival in armed conflict. The paper emphasizes the importance of an understanding of spirituality in explorations of the violence of military landscapes.

KEYWORDS soldiers, religion, landscape, war, spirituality, Uganda

Introduction

This paper focuses on the ways in which Ugandan soldiers fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan war conceptualized their survival as an act of God or a transcendent entity, a mode of explanation facilitated by culture and

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tradition. The article argues for an understanding of the spirituality and culture of military personnel as an important facet of soldiers' experiences of military landscapes. Exploring this spiritual dimension illuminates our understanding soldiers' experiences of these particular wars. In the war under discussion, deployed soldiers engaged in armed combat under often horrific conditions, in locations where the landscape of conflict was at times as much a source of violence as the activities of the enemy. Reflecting back on their experiences, former Ugandan soldiers conceived their survival as not only dependent on their military training but also as being dependent on the supernatural powers of a transcendent being (usually but not exclusively understood as God). The paper adds to our understanding of the military landscape by noting how soldiers understood it to have a spiritual dimension, one which soldiers themselves viewed as shaped and influenced by things beyond their own control. The paper challenges the perspective that military expeditions are endeavours where and the survival of soldiers hinge entirely on strategic rational processes. In doing so, it challenges not only the Western perspective of separating the religious and the secular, or religion and politics, but also the prospects of the secularization thesis in Africa as was anticipated following the decline of religion in Europe. In this paper, we first outline the centrality of religion and spirituality in Africa since this is a central aspect of the thesis of our paper. We then contextualize the war experiences of soldiers by discussing the Ugandan Army deployments to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. After outlining the methodology used for the underpinning research, we discuss the horrendous experiences the ex-combatants encountered in the war landscapes of the DRC and South Sudan conflicts. We then engage with how their spirituality, culture and traditions of engagement with supernatural powers acted as sources of survival and motivation to these soldiers. We conclude that military landscapes need to be understood not only as landscapes shaped by armed conflict, but also as landscapes which themselves can bring violence to military personnel. We also emphasize the need to consider the significance of the spiritual dimension in its many forms when seeking to understand the contemporary African military experience.

Conceptualizing religion and spirituality in Africa

The belief of soldiers in God or the transcendent has to be understood in the context of the role of spirituality in people's lives in many parts of Africa. As a number of scholars have pointed out, 'Africans are notoriously religious' (Mbiti, 1969: 1), and 'in all things [Africans] are religious' (Idowu, 1967: 3–13). While these may be exaggerations, they point to the centrality of religion in southern African people's lives. Secularization, understood as the decline of religion in people's lives (see Casanova, 1994; Tarusarira, 2016), was anticipated in Africa and Asia following the decline of religion in Europe. The Indian historian and diplomat K. M. Pannikar argued that religion would decline in Africa and Asia following the end of Western colonial rule, because it was associated with colonialism and

depended on mission school systems (Gifford, 1995: 2). While Christianity appears to be on the wane in (Northern) Europe (and thus seemed to offer a prime case in favour of the secularization thesis), a new global brand of Pentecostalism thrives in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Meyer, 2004: 452). It is not only Christianity that is prevalent but African religion is, as well, healthy and alive.

Traditionally most African people believe in the power of the sacred. At no stage of their lives can they live without a sacred canopy or veil of mystification, to use Berger's (1967) terms. Their world is a 'continuum between the visible and invisible worlds'. Mankind shares its environment with spirits which influence mundane transactions and with which direct communication is possible (Ellis & Ter Haar, 1998: 179, 187; Ellis & Ter Haar, 2004). Spirituality is not a philosophical abstraction but has practical aspect. The idea that ancestors influence events in the present is widespread in much of Africa, even among professed Christians. The ancestors live among and impact the lives of the living. They want to be shown affection by being included in everyday human activities like participating directly in political life (Smith, 1996: 3; Tarusarira, 2016).

Spiritual illusions have been displayed in African uprisings such as the spirit mediums in Zimbabwe, the Church of Alice Lensina in Zambia and the Maji Maji rebellion in Tanzania, in which the fighters were convinced that sprinkling with herbal concoctions could render them immune to the bullets during combat (Allen, 1991). Spirit mediums, were linked to the 1st and 2nd *Chimurenga*, that is, the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (Tarusarira, 2016). Guerrillas, after realizing that the spirit mediums had a lot of respect among the peasants, tried to get them to their side in order to win the support of the peasants (Lan, 1985; see also Chitkutuku in this special issue). The spirit mediums helped in mobilization, recruitment and boosting the morale of the guerrillas. Ranger (1970: 2, cf. 1985) suggests that African resistance to European colonialism could also be seen as a war between two religious systems. According to Chung (2006: 197–98) traditional religious leaders held a special position in the psyche of the freedom fighters, particularly the peasant soldiers. Leaders such as Nehanda and Kaguvi at the end of the nineteenth century opposed colonialism and were instrumental in organizing opposition. It is also notable that during the colonial period chiefs, whose religious leadership rested on spirit mediums, were co-opted by the colonial government. This is the reason why they were excluded from governance structures at independence (Wood, 2008: 542–55). Similar beliefs are inherent in the recent history of Ugandan wars through Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit movement and Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. By framing ideologies and war principles through culture and biblical verses, it triggered a belief in mystical guidance that induced fearlessness of the gun. The belief that they were fighting for God and judgment and their assumption that it was only sinners who died (Allen, 1991: 377), was an indication of warriors harnessing the metaphysical in pursuit of the cause against technologically superior powers.

In discussing the spirituality of Uganda ex-soldiers, we attempt to show that their sentiments and interactions were built around religio-traditional knowledge systems (Kanyadango, 2008). Indeed, belief in locally relevant values, religion and science offer a unique way of responding to people's problems in Africa. As shall be seen from the narratives, belief in the mystical and veneration of God (or gods) remains an important endogenous resource shaping African heritage. While the veterans discussed in this article did not explicitly state what was done at a practical level at the front line, their reasoning is important in understanding the African religious world view and the diversity of symbolism, both visible and invisible, that are evoked in times of danger. Thus, this world view provides a framework for further analysis of our findings in the later part of this article.

Ugandan Army deployments to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan

In 1987, Joseph Kony led the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war against the government of Uganda, with conflict particularly acute in Northern Uganda (Lomo & Hovil, 2004). In turn, LRA military activities were supported by the government of Sudan in retaliation for Uganda's support to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) rebels (who themselves were in conflict with the Sudanese government). In due course, when the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) was permitted to launch an offensive against the LRA in 2003, the rebels fled to the mountains in South Sudan and then crossed back to Uganda, establishing bases in the border regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR). From these bases, the LRA would then be able to reorganize and re-launch its activities aimed at bringing political chaos on the country.

During this time period, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) emerged, which comprised Ugandan opposition forces, and which were also allegedly supported by the government of Sudan. Subsequently, the Uganda military intervened by deploying troops to counter threats from the Sudanese government that was supporting the rebels, and to dislodge the rebel sanctuaries in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this light, it suffices to say that the presence of the rebel forces of LRA and ADF were a major factor leading to the eventual UPDF invasion of DRC and Sudan.

In 1998 Ugandan soldiers were deployed in the DRC war as part of Uganda's strategic objective of fighting the LRA rebels believed to be hiding and engaging in offensive fighting against it. However, Uganda's involvement in the DRC war resulted in huge losses for the Ugandan military; very many soldiers lost their lives and this conflict was also characterized by the loss of military equipment; for Clark (2002), Uganda's involvement in the DRC war was in itself a total failure. Although the veterans did not pose a huge threat on return, developing new forms of social relationships and new ties with the communities after several years in the war was

difficult. Without a clear government reintegration strategy, the scattered veterans declared that they encountered severe challenges dealing with socioeconomic pressure and trauma. The small retirement package they received could neither meet their economic needs nor sustain livelihoods. Others lamented never receiving any benefits to date. Thus, not only did they count on military skills of perseverance and creativity for enabling them gain social acceptance, but also on transcendent power, for their survival. For instance, they pointed to personal discipline and good collaboration as a contributing factor for socialization. Moreover, they leaned towards peer group solidarity and individualistic attempts at economic achievements. For example, through voluntary initiatives a Saving and Credit Cooperative Organisation (SACCO) had been formed by a few veterans in the outskirts of Kampala city, where a monthly contribution was made and meagre credit advanced to members in difficult times. Others had retired to subsistence farming and small businesses. Subsequently, the struggle for survival had pushed them to develop feelings of frustration, exclusion, and abandonment by the ruling regime. As Clark (2002) points to a failure of the war, similarly, the veterans pointed to a failure of the government to recognize them or provide a befitting reward for their services.

Methodology

The data used in this paper was obtained through life history interviews with nine ex-soldiers in Uganda (eight men and one woman) between November 2016 and June 2017. The article aims to understand how the spirituality and culture of military personnel is an important facet of soldiers' experiences of military landscapes and their survival. Towards this aim, the research's objectives were to establish these soldiers' lived wartime experiences in the bush, and also to understand their current civilian livelihoods after reintegrating into their communities. We resorted to engaging with the life experiences of the ex-combatants, based on the understanding that only when their voices and experiences are at the centre of investigation can the multiple, complex and entangled determinants of their experience come to the fore. This provides us with an opportunity for thick description (Geertz, 1973), that is, a detailed ethnographic engagement with the life worlds of the soldiers. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, their military training and the fragile political situation in Uganda, military veterans can be described as a hard-to-reach group. Thus, in this study, the participants were purposively recruited through a tracer study, basing on snowball sampling procedures (Hennink, et al., 2011; Tukundane & Zeelen, 2015). The former soldiers were traced and interviewed by this paper's first author (Alice Wabule), who asked interviewees to link her to other potential interviewees, as per the snowballing method. She connected only with those veterans who had directly fought in the wars in DRC and South Sudan. These had relevant life experiences and thus were considered to be information-rich (Creswell, 2012). The intention was to explore the individual stories of the veterans' lived realities. In this case, the selection of the participants did not aim at achieving

representativeness in terms of the sample but rather was aimed at ensuring the 'richness of the data' through exploring a variety of voices and perspectives (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Most of the interviews were conducted in the local language (Luganda) and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Although the researcher's local knowledge of Luganda and that of some interviewees was not completely fluent, she was able to understand the interview partners sufficiently, and vice-versa; not only is Luganda a widely spoken and understood language in the local context, but it was also the language preferred by the interviewees who claimed that their English was minimal. All the interviews were recorded verbatim by use of a voice recorder and transcribed into text shortly after each discussion. Quotations used in this paper have been translated into English by the first author. Of course, there was initial mistrust by interviewees about being recorded, based on the fear that the researcher could perhaps be a spy for the government. This called for a thorough introduction by the researcher at the outset of the research process, which included an explanation of the researcher's career, her refuting any identification with politics, her presenting to them her identity cards, as well as her sharing with her interviewees her PhD thesis and other publications. She also made use of the already interviewed veterans who would connect her to the next interviewee to explain her role and erase fears.

Moreover, adopting an approach of meeting the veterans at their association office at the market place where they usually gathered in the evenings after conducting their businesses proved to be useful. The researcher first met the veterans as a group, which provided an opportunity for them to interrogate and question her motivations for the research and the benefits to them. It allowed social interaction, and created a safer conversational space in later interviews. This encouraged interviewees to open up and be more expansive in their explanations, thereby revealing new insights and important information (Owen, 2006). Finally, some form of rapport was built and the interviewees felt more comfortable about their participation. The veterans also consented to their voices being recorded, and some of them declared that their identity could be revealed if the researcher so wished. In their view, the research would serve as a way of voicing their concerns as veterans to the general public and the current National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, which they perceived as having done little to reward them for the work they did in bringing the current leadership into power. Thus, whereas the researcher clearly explained her identity as a researcher, she was also seen as a good friend who had been out in the wider community and would understand the veterans' problems and help them advance their goals. Seru, one of the participants, said to the researcher:

> … you should be coming to visit us … for us we are always here … we have now become friends. You can use [work with] some of us the disabled and get [lobby for] more things …

At the start of each interview, the subject of inquiry was introduced in detail to the interviewee, as were the motivations for researching war experiences for ex-combatants. The process of building rapport was done with great self-consciousness and awareness on the part of the interviewer, in order not to raise resistance or bad feelings that could lead the interviewees avoiding sharing some information about their lived experiences. Hence, extra care and flexibility were used when negotiating the researcher's own identity in exchanges with the interviewees, dealing with their fears and expectations, and deciding what information to share in the process of opening communicative space (Snoeren, et al., 2012), and getting them to tell their stories. For instance, Seru's submission above indicates that he did not only see Alice's role as a researcher, but also as one who could work with the veterans towards achieving some tangible benefits. Moreover, each interview was conducted in a quiet place away from public viewing because the veterans seemed too sensitive and suspicious. On one occasion, an interviewee mumbled 'I smell a rat' when someone approached in the direction of the interview. A moment of silence followed and it took a few minutes before the interviewee was finally convinced that the person was not interested in the conversation. Consequently, although the interviewees were probed and continuously encouraged to be as open as possible, some of them did not narrate their stories with ease. A few strained to think through how their conversations fitted into the subject of inquiry and expressed a feeling that certain elements of their story could not be revealed. Others kept reminding the interviewer that their stories were complex, messy and their difficult experiences would be hard to understand or believe for a lay person. Evident from this scenario is the ambiguous status of war veterans in Uganda. Rather than being people of honour, who should feel free and confident to express themselves in their own country, the fact that they struggled to express themselves and feared that some unwanted audience might hear their conversations indicates otherwise. This state of affairs shaped the research environment in so far as the responses did not come straight away but had to be filtered. This is a common phenomenon in research involving the military and war veterans (see Williams, et al., 2016).

The violence of military landscapes

We acknowledge Woodward's assertion that military landscapes can be perceived in terms of the violence perpetrated by military personnel (Woodward, 2004). In this article, we explore veterans' explanations of their wartime experiences, focusing on the idea of a military landscape as one where the landscape itself is a source of violence. This challenges the notion that military landscapes can only be perceived in terms of the violence perpetrated by military personnel (Woodward, 2004, 2014). We, thus reverse Woodward's argument. As our interviewees noted, most documented narratives of soldiers indicate that what they continuously experienced in the bush can be very difficult for civilians to grasp. Nonetheless, horrific memories

of torment, trauma, hardship, and different forms of brutality, physical and emotional suffering, and uncertainty were recorded by most of the veterans interviewed The interviewees narrated ordeals of anguish associated with the difficulties encountered in adapting to unfamiliar surroundings, landscapes and cultures, walking long distances and lacking shelter in the harsh and inhabitable jungle. Isaac, who spent several years in the jungle, explained that they usually dug holes commonly known as *undach* [trenches] to set camp for rest. These were covered with grass and sticks, and only raincoats were provided to shelter from the cold and heavy rains in the tropical rainforest. John shared that since they were always on guard, such makeshift wartime shelters during deployment were immediately abandoned as soon as the enemy approached, indicating the extremes of physical discomfort endured in these landscapes of military operation.

In their narratives about the war, the former soldiers talked about food shortages. The government provided food and other logistical supplies in form of dry rations such as tinned beef and biscuits. Rice, cooking oil and maize meal were also occasionally provided. Nonetheless, there were still food shortages for several reasons. First, the logistics operations which maintained food supplies were located at the tactical headquarters, and these were located sometimes at a considerable distance from the front line of active operations. Second, it was typical for the soldiers to run out of food whenever they pursued the enemy into the remote and inaccessible forested zones of the Democratic Republic of Congo, or when the enemy cut them off from possible communication channels. Subsequently, many lives were lost in attempts to get food to eat. Aisha, a female soldier, recounted,

> We used to uproot cassava, yams and potatoes from people's gardens … we ate the peelings of cassava, peelings of potatoes, banana peelings … we could eat everything. You get me. Because whenever you went to look for food to come and eat from our hideouts, it was like you were simply sacrificing yourselves … if you came back without being killed, then you could thank God for it. But it was difficult to come back when they have not killed some of you … You have gone to look for food but coming back alive was not easy. (Aisha)

Due to the difficulties encountered in getting food, it was inevitable that whatever they collected had to be used sparingly. John explained that they ate leaves; the peelings of root tubers and skins from animals were dried on tree trunks and then later soaked and boiled for food in times of scarcity. Throwing away anything was tantamount to wastage. John explained further,

> Now the food that you have gathered, there was nothing to throw away from that food. You had to eat everything including the peelings. You dry the peelings and later cook porridge and food out of it. When we could reach in a place for cattle keepers who could give us a cow or who had cows at that time, we could eat only meat again and again and again.

As for water, Aisha revealed the living conditions in war, walking long distances before accessing water sources. There were no safe water sources, rather the soldiers drank from natural streams in the bush as did the wild game, an activity which put their lives at great risk of illness. As Aisha stated, 'we could drink from them like you see cows drinking water in the bush … that was the water we used to drink'.

The most bewildering experiences shared by veterans related to times of sickness and the treatment of war causalities. The ex-soldiers recounted incidences of disease out-breaks during deployment, such malaria, and terrible skin rashes, and they also talked of problems with wounds and fleas, which they attributed mostly to the unhygienic conditions in which they lived. For instance, as has been noted enormous amounts of time were spent in the jungles of DRC living under conditions of poor sanitation. Such primitive sanitary conditions made disease a constant threat.

Describing the bush as inhabitable, Isaac pointed to difficulties faced in accessing basic logistics like food, medicines and clothing. Moreover, their military livelihoods included encountering wild animals, walking bare foot, making sandals out of car tires, patching clothes to wear and enduring extreme cold or intense sunshine.

> In DRC … the forests are really unique, at least other places. Congo is terrible. Those tropical forests of Congo are very bad; they are uninhabitable … Now there are those places where there are game parks … there are places where there are just plain forests … there were forests where you could find these … they call them pygmies … those are the only people living there … just in the bush … You walk and find a small village far with the natives … (Isaac)

In sharing the torment of his lived reality, John narrated that he once spent weeks in the jungles without clothing. It was not until an ambush was carried out that they got clothing to wear.

> … there are certain things that I do not want to speak about because I feel ashamed of them … we were in the bush there and we had to carry out an ambush … Now I used to have a lot of lice in my clothes … now it rained on us the whole night … now when it came to morning and the sun was up, the lice started moving and biting. I had a jacket, a shirt, a trouser and an underwear. So, I removed the clothes to dry them and then put on the jacket. I told my colleague … when the gunshots start … in case I have dozed off and you see, please help and remove my clothes. Do not leave them. Unfortunately, when I slept, they also slept … the bullets started … they raided us … I ran with only the jacket … I left all my clothes, but I spent a whole week without any other clothing. I did not have an underwear … So it was like one week later that we ambushed a vehicle. The first thing to get from the vehicle was clothes. And I dressed immediately. (John)

In order to maintain their courage, the soldiers resorted to excessive use of drugs, which in a way accelerated violence and attacks on civilians. The above narrative also points to John displaying feelings of shame and guilt at the same time

because of the horrible memories of his actions against fellow citizens, which stood in contrast with the African spirit of brotherhood and extended kinship. This idea promotes an expectation that individuals would play a role in the existence of others and the community, and not in their destruction. Such feelings of guilt were more pronounced when the ex-soldiers recounted the ambushes they carried out on vehicles in order to get items from people, including the dead and wounded. John upheld that it was difficult for anyone who had never participated in war to grasp the experience because in his view, everything was messy and grim. The struggle to sustain their survival could in some ways have pushed the rebels also to commit certain atrocities. These ideas about the difficulty of communicating and understanding an experience of military combat are recognized in other accounts of military participation in other contexts, of course (Hynes, 1998; Vernon, 2007).

The soldiers recounted experiences of severe difficulties whenever they sustained injuries during the war in circumstances where there was no medical assistance. Apart from pressing a wound with salt and hot water, as John explained, the next best alternative for them was to rely on traditional herbal treatments. A more horrifying revelation was that depending on the extent of the causality and the condition of the war, people who sustained serious injuries were often killed. Accordingly, such decisions were made because of the fear that the sick person might leak information to the enemy if captured. Yet, due to the shortage of service men and women, deployment was compulsory regardless of whether one was fit to fight or not. As Isaac explained:

> … Like during those days during our years everyone had to go. No matter how you looked, you had to go … They were taking everybody regardless … whether asthmatic, whether what … whether having diarrhea, go and dehydrate from there … sometimes when you are sick, they can see now this one, there is nothing much we can do for him, bring our gun and let this one remain [die] … so that problem is sorted and the rest continue … (Isaac)

One the other hand, John explained that the treatment given to war casualties depended on the rank one held in the forces. Recounting his own experience, he narrated that he was privileged that his subordinates physically carried him for a full month to safety because he was a commander. He mentioned that he was occasionally abandoned because people had to go and fight. What was fortunate for him was, because he held a rank he would be left with his gun to fend for his survival until the rest of his soldiers returned. He indicated that there was never an ideal situation and perfect condition, rather, soldiers were always prepared to swing into action whenever the situation worsened:

> For me, they carried me for one whole month, passing through the bush, carrying me through the bush when I was sick. They would make local stretchers uhu … ehe … that is where they used to put us. They tie with banana fibers,

> ropes grass … that was it … what was important was that because I was a commander, they could carry me with my gun on my stretcher. So, I used to have my gun on the stretcher. So, when they abandon me, I first fight for my life … (John)

Generally, the interviewed veterans seemed troubled and tormented about answering questions on what they often described as narrow escapes, hurdles, and tunnels crossed. Others turned emotional when recounting their engagements. Bullu, believed that it was only God's favour that led to his and his colleagues' survival of the harsh and life-threatening conditions of the jungles where they were deployed:

> Life — don't even ask about it … it was terrible, terrible … clothes, food and medicine, name it. By the way for us God kept us. Our colleagues who went to look for food were killed from there … our survival is God's secret …

Although Bullu might have survived death, he lost half of his hand. Several other soldiers were found to have sustained multiple physical deformations, including the loss of their manhood:

> … as we talk now, some of us have nails into their bodies … and nobody can be born with a nail. Do you know that some people have no testicles … ? There are certain things that I talk that I wouldn't want to talk about. I just have to select for you … they promised to take me back to operate this hand, but it also failed and even the hand still pains me. (Bullu)

Those who participated in armed hostilities in Uganda like Aisha, John or Bullu, are more likely to develop problems of flashbacks and nightmares, which persist long after the fighting had ceased. For instance, Isaac, when asked how he felt about his life in the jungle, occasionally broke down in tears during the interview. He explained that remembering the torment they went through and the colleagues who died during the war brought back awful memories.

> If you recall those incidences, you just conclude, only God knows … Now you could be having your friend and they die when you are seeing … their family can never see the body or bury them [sheds tears]. Of course, there are moments … there are difficult moments where you see and say, am I the one? You see all your colleagues die, when you have been together, and you remember them … that moment comes and it is painful … (Isaac)

Isaac's breakdowns can be read as mourning for his comrades, and a sense of his being weakened by the death of his compatriots. Feeling fully human through his comrades, Isaac felt incomplete without them. This resonates with the concept of Ubuntu in African philosophy, which asserts that a person is a person through other persons. One way of expressing this is 'I am because you are'. Out of this dictum emerges the spirit of comradeship. More importantly, Ubuntu serves as the spiritual foundation of African societies. Furthermore, the death of his comrades

could also have motivated Isaac, in the form of keeping the idea of connection and comradeship alive (and thus also the dead soldiers' spirit), in the present, through the mechanism of remembrance of his dead compatriots. One's death does not cut him or her off from the being of a soldier. In this way, we see a spiritual outlook being presented in the military by remembering the fellow soldiers who passed on in war. The death of comrades thus became a motivator insofar as continuing to fight was a way to honour those who had died. The dead in African spirituality are referred to as the living dead because they remain part of the community, though in a different form of being.

By and large, the ways in which soldiers were subjected to wartime conditions, challenges the notion that soldiers only do violence on the landscapes in which they operate in (see Woodward, 2004, 2014). Although military personnel are often presented as perpetrators of violence in the landscape, in fact, the landscape does violence to soldiers. Furthermore, this landscape as a 'text' (Woodward, 2014) is given meaning by the soldiers who operated on it, in terms of the ways in which they learnt to read its inhospitable features and dangers. This idea reminds us that military landscapes can be places of great danger for soldiers, not just because of the violence of military operations but also because of the violence they experience by just operating in such conditions. Subsequently, the ex-service men affirmed that talking about certain incidences were traumatizing and revived painful memories, which could easily rejuvenate anger. To them, keeping silent was understood to be the best way of concealing bitterness. Yet, keeping silent could also imply living a life of denial and mental disturbance that Angucia (2010) referred to as traumatic memory. We have also seen through soldiers' discussions of their experience an indication of the importance of spiritual beliefs for survival, the traumas which follow their participation in violence because of the violation of accepted norms of behaviour regarding others and the wider community, and the ways in which ideas of remembrance were used to sustain survival. We consider this idea of spirituality and survival in more detail in the next section.

Spiritual beliefs and survival

The belief in God or some spiritual power was a common thread in the narratives of the veterans. It is notable that God was mentioned in passing in the quotations used above, but it should be stressed that references to God recurred amongst all other interviewees for this research. The conclusion drawn from this is that religion is a significant factor in war; war is not only physical but also spiritual. Spirituality was invoked not just in terms of protection. The wars in which these veterans fought were at face value prosecuted without any religious connotations or cause. However, spiritual ideas were evident in different ways for the military personnel involved. Understanding these religious beliefs is thus vital to understanding how the soldiers themselves understood the war and their survival. Often, in discussing soldiers' survival in war, we often resort to explanation via tangible resources for

protection, such as military equipment and skills. Spiritual belief is less frequently considered as an intangible resource for survival. Religious or spiritual conviction can of course be seen as motivation for war. We already pointed out that during the liberation war in Zimbabwe, Ranger (1970: 2; see also Ranger, 1985) suggests that African resistance to European colonialism could also be seen as a war between two religious systems. In the same vein, Chung (2006: 197–98) reminds that traditional religious leaders held a special position for the freedom fighters, particularly the peasant soldiers. The former soldiers we interviewed might not have consulted religious actors. However, their belief in God as responsible for their survival intimates the religious and spiritual psyche and the importance of their belief that God had protected them, was thus on their side, and hence was part of their war. Even though scholars such as Woodward (2000) point out that soldiers can be perceived as 'warrior heroes', the wartime situation discussed by the Ugandan ex-soldiers was shown to present challenges, which were beyond the soldiers' skills. In this paper, we argue that understanding military experience in the landscapes of war requires consideration of the intangible religious and cultural factors, which shape the experiences of military personnel. In other words, war does not only engage the hard power of mighty ammunition, but also soft power found in the form of religion and spirituality. Whether soldiers believed in God before joining the bush wars or not, there is a tendency for Africans to fall back to spiritual powers in times of danger, behaviour which is rooted in the African spiritual world view (Kanyandago, 2008). This is why, for the soldiers who survived, belief in the mighty power overrides the strength of the gun. However, it is in order to argue that the war might have changed the religious and spiritual consciousness of the soldiers to believe in profound ways.

The interview extracts below reveal to us some of the ways in which soldiers believed in 'powers' beyond themselves. Thus, soldiers like Isaac did not only believe in the mighty power of their military equipment, but rather viewed the spirit of God as the guiding and protective spirit.

> I thank God so much that as you see me here, I don't have any wound of a bullet, but the bullets that I have passed through, I can't count them for you. One time, we were in Kaya [South Sudan] and there came an aircraft to attack us. Sincerely, they had been directed to hit exactly where we were. So, the missile was released but the person misfired. Instead of the missiles hitting us, it hit their base. You see that such a scenario at times it is God who saves … The plane came and arrived well when we were all seeing it, and yet we did not have the missiles to hit back. You see that at that moment you are all going … But the missile was released, it came down when we were seeing it and you say, let me lie down and wait for my death and it ends. But God is the one who does everything … It landed on their side … (Isaac)

Similarly, Aisha narrated her ordeal, reaffirming God's mighty power as a crucial factor for her survival:

> Terrible … it is hard to get back to it … and when you happen to get back to it [think about it], you can even run mad. You ask yourself, is it my ghost talking and it is me a person talking? You ask, am I the one living or they created another person in me. Why me? Why am I still living … am I really the one or it is my ghost and where are the people I were with? When all the people we were with died long time ago … they died in the war, while in the bush and others died after the overthrow. Now for us we are there as a miracle. When I say miracle, I think you understand. Because people died of hunger in the bush … a whole battalion, they would kill and it remains only one person or two. The answer to it is that only God knows why you are still living. Because they can ask you, how many people did you kill and you fail to say, because you don't even know the number. When you revive the anger of the bush (laughter) you can just kill people …

In the above extract, Aisha like Isaac spells out categorically that only God knows why she is still alive and she explains her survival as a miracle. This intimates that belief in God's protection was a key part of the war, and the memory of the war, for her. God's protection was seen as a motivator and a reservoir for protection. Aisha uses the word 'miracle' to explain her survival. To remain alive after a whole battalion had been wiped out could be interpreted in many ways; for Aisha, the explanation was that she was involved in fighting a just war and God wanted her to continue. This gave her the courage to keep fighting as well as to remain strong in faith. War presented the ex-combatants with existential questions, the answers to which belong to the realm of the transcendent or divine. To ask such questions like 'Why I am I still living?' and to answer them with responses like 'It is God who knows' is to directly incorporate religion and spirituality as explanatory factors and as a resource. From this, we conclude that soldiers directly or indirectly operated under a sacred canopy (Berger, 1967), an idea which kept them going even in the face of clear evidence of insurmountable vicissitudes. This resonates with the assertion that traditionally, Africans believe in the power of the sacred. At no stage of their lives can they live without a veil of mystification (Berger, 1967, Tarusarira, 2016). This idea is better understood when contrasted to the secularist perspective that dominates most Western societies. In such societies, secular liberal values that undermine the religious are prioritized. In African religion, which applies to Uganda, existential questions end up at God's door. God protects, provides guards against misfortune and advances fortune.

Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with ex-soldiers who had been deployed with the Ugandan armed forces for active duties in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South

Sudan, this paper has examined issues of landscape and spirituality, and has explored the ways in which soldiers' beliefs in God, culture and tradition were thought to be significant for their survival. We have argued that received orthodoxy tends to present soldiers only as perpetrators of violence on the landscape, an assertion that obscures the horrors of war which they have to endure. Horrors of war include the violence that military landscapes inflict upon military personnel, as well as the horrors that follow from enemy operations. In turn, we can see from the ex-soldiers' narratives that the horrific experiences they recounted were such that, in the soldiers' view, they require more than human power to transcend them. For this reason, we argue that it is important that soldiers' activities in calling on spiritual or transcendent power should be recognized as part of the wider debate on what military landscapes are, and how they might be understood. As the interviews demonstrated, God was frequently referenced. It emerged from our research that the dangers of the landscape of war instigates existential questions within combatants, answers to which were difficult to find within the human realm. The paper thus contributes to our understanding of the military landscape as one which is characterized by fear of death and violence, and where spirituality is significant as a response. It adds to our understanding of military personnel's engagement with military landscapes. From our research, we conclude survival in an African war is explained for ex-soldiers as related to their religious beliefs. From this we infer that military landscapes that soldiers engage with can be understood in spiritual terms, and not only as terrain to be controlled through a soldier's knowledge and understanding of the gun.

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